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CONTINUING

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A WELL-KNOWN religious teacher has said in public, on more than one occasion, that perhaps too much emphasis has been laid upon Bible study. In these days, as he expressed it, one does not need to read and study the Bible in order to become familiar with Bible truth, for the literature of the day is permeated with the same great truths which are presented in the Bible. One is really coming into contact with the Bible when he reads the better class of novels. Our entire civilization is throughout influenced by biblical teaching, and, whether we will or not, one is thus brought into contact with the Bible. Consequently, as this same teacher would have us believe, if one does not take pleasure in reading the Bible itself, he must not feel that he is therefore falling short of performing his duty. This lack of interest in the Bible is no indication that he is, any the less, a good Christian. If he prefers, let him read the ordinary literature of the day, since, in so doing, he is after all, perhaps, just as satisfactorily performing his duty in this respect.

SUCH a representation, it must be confessed, seems to the writer to be erroneous and misleading. If, now, a tenth part of that which many of us believe concerning the origin and character of the biblical records is true, there attaches to these records a value incomparably greater than any which may be ascribed to the ordinary literature. Even if our ideas concerning the divine

origin of these books should not be accepted, how can any one fail to recognize the tremendous influence exerted by these documents upon the history of the world and upon its thinking through many centuries. If no other reason existed for a careful examination of this old literature, it would be enough that it is a literature which stands to-day in all its glory and with all its strength, while other literatures have come and gone with the generations. The very fact that the books which one picks up on every side contain the same truths, is an additional reason why every intelligent man, especially if he be a Christian, should come into the closest touch with the books which have furnished the sources of all this later literature, and which are its fountain-head. Indeed, one cannot understand this literature as a whole, or the thousands of allusions which it contains to biblical literature without knowing the biblical literature itself. From every point of view, therefore, it is incumbent upon the man who wishes to know anything, or who at all events wishes to be intelligent, in respect to the religion which he professes and which is the nominal religion of the country in which he lives,—to know, whatever else he may or may not know, the Bible.

THE difficulty, after all, lies chiefly in the fact that most of us exhaust our energies in discussing the desirability of Bible study and in what may be called the theoretical part, without taking up the practical side of the question. We theorize, but we fail to practice. It is easy, of course, to tell others what they ought to do; it is more difficult to do this for ourselves, or to join with others in doing it. If a fair proportion of the time occupied by teachers and taught in an effort to show or to learn how to study the Bible, were employed in actual study, the results would be immeasurably greater. Perhaps we should divide ourselves into two classes, it being the work of one class to theorize and of the other to practice. But a moment's thought will show that theory without practice is not only a futile work for those who do the theorizing, but as well for those in whose behalf it is undertaken. The solution of this problem, like that of all problems, is found in placing the two things, practice and

theory, in their right order. This new phrase, "practice and theory," is, to be sure, far less euphonious than the old one, "theory and practice," but it is a phrase of scientific value. It is no more absurd to formulate a theory in order to explain facts unknown to pupil or teacher, than to put in theoretical form that which an untrained pupil will be expected to practice in the work which he undertakes. The country is filled with what is called normal work,—a work which, as generally conducted, may be prosecuted through all time without securing practical results of any considerable value. Why? Because the main characteristic of such work is the emphasis placed upon theory. It leads its adherents to learn about the Bible rather than to learn the Bible. It will at once be conceded that rather than learn nothing, to learn about the Bible is desirable. But to substitute this knowledge for direct knowledge of the Bible, and to permit those who engage in the work thus to deceive themselves, is a great mistake. Let us teach those whose study we guide to engage in the practical work of securing a real and, so far as it goes, a thorough, knowledge of the facts presented in the Bible and the truths connected with these facts. If this be done, we may be confident that the mysterious influence which has made this sacred collection a power in the world's history wherever it has been known, will continue to exert itself in the minds and hearts of those who are thus brought into vital connection with it. Why are so few of us deeply interested in this great record? Because we have satisfied ourselves with playing about upon the surface of it; because we have never made it our real business to know it. How, now, can we most easily persuade the rank and file of the Christian churches to undertake this thing as a business? Certainly by insisting that it is the duty of every Christian to know at least something for himself of that which furnishes him the foundation of his faith, and which he has accepted before the world as an authoritative guide in matters of practical life. May any class of men and women be excused from this obligation? No. The man who asks to be excused ought to see that he is virtually asking to remain in ignorance of that which is most vital. He

is like a traveler who decides to go to a far distant city, and proposes to make the journey without receiving from any one directions concerning the route over which he is to travel, being satisfied to note here and there a stray notice of the journey, without consulting for himself the official guide.

THE duty of practical study and of actual acquisition rests, without doubt, first of all upon the minister. If he does not proclaim the contents of these books, he surely has no other message to present. As has frequently been suggested in these pages, the most important function of the minister is that of teaching. If he would put forth every effort to implant in the minds of his people the Bible in all its variety and in its entirety, he might easily enough be willing to allow the Holy Spirit which, as we believe, always accompanies this sacred material, to finish the work which he thus begins. If, instead of a few words from the sacred record, and a long address or dissertation more or less remotely connected with these words, he were to give to his hearers a section of the Bible, with such setting and with such application as would bring it into close adjustment with the situation, he would relieve himself of a fearful responsibility which otherwise he assumes, and would in all probability perform more acceptably the work which his Master has given him to do. The position taken by too many ministers is similar to that often noticed in some great mercantile establishment in which millions of capital are invested, and thousands of men employed. In such an establishment, presided over by men whose names are known throughout the world, directed by their skill and wisdom, one often hears an employee, perhaps that one who draws the lowest salary, speak of what the company can do or will do, substituting for the company not even the modest "we," which itself, though a modest term, is sufficiently individualistic, but instead the bald and bold expression—"I." Does the minister of to-day realize the need of a scientific knowledge of the material for the promulgation of which he has devoted his life? Surely he ought not to satisfy himself with a merely cursory examination of these records. Nothing short

of a mastery of their contents and a familiarity with the thought of modern research and investigation in reference to them should be regarded as sufficient. It is for him to set an example to be followed by those for whose guidance he is responsible. The laity can never be persuaded to take hold of the matter in sincere earnestness until the clergy, by the work which they themselves have done, shall hold up an ideal towards which all may reach out.

THOSE who assume the responsibility of teaching the Bible in Sunday Schools and elsewhere, owe it to themselves and the cause for which they are working, to make a preparation in some measure at least commensurate with the work they propose to do. It is a sin, a grievous sin, against God and against man, for any one to undertake to expound the Word of God without having first secured the best possible preparation for that work. To do this implies, on the part of the one who does it, either the conception that the Word of God is so powerful that without the aid of man its truth will reach the ears of those for whom it is intended, or that the whole matter is of little consequence, and deserving therefore of little attention. Both of these conceptions are erroneous. It would be better to have fewer teachers if the few could be better teachers. Thirty or forty pupils will make better progress under a single good teacher than can be made by the same number in the hands of three or four poor teachers. Indeed the danger of our present system is not that the pupils will make no progress, but that they will be injured mentally and spiritually because of the particular instruction which they receive. If, then, those who have undertaken the responsible work of teaching would devote themselves more assiduously to gaining a knowledge of the Bible itself, and be satisfied to give up a considerable portion of the other reading which they are accustomed to do, the obligation resting upon them would be more satisfactorily met.

BUT now, the laity are not altogether free from responsibility in this matter. Indeed, it may be said that here the most

important questions arise. How can the business man, or the woman with household cares upon her, find time in the midst of other duties to do even the minimum of work which might be regarded as sufficient? No dogmatic answer may be given to this question, but suggestions may be made which possibly are worthy of consideration:

1. The time given to such work, even though small, should be employed, as indicated above, to the best advantage. This means that it will be occupied in work of a character which will bring results. The shorter the time at one's disposal, the greater the necessity that it shall be used properly.

2. If in legitimate ways enthusiasm can be aroused, and a genuine interest in the work secured, the work accomplished in any given period will be far greater. Results depend very largely, not upon the amount of time devoted to a given thing, but to the spirit with which the work is undertaken. Indifference is a deadly thing. Enthusiasm fires the heart and quickens the mind.

3. If, now, real interest exists, one will find it possible to devote to this thing many a minute, many a half hour which would have been employed otherwise, or which would have been altogether lost. It is amazing how much time one may secure for that in which he is really interested. Sacrifice may often be necessary, but of what consequence is that, if in the end good comes. Concentration of mind and effort is the one thing needful. Distraction is the order of the day. Too many things are undertaken, and consequently there is a flagging of interest. This naturally carries with it failure.

It is a mistake, we maintain, to suppose that there is any book or set of books, the study of which may be substituted for that of the Bible. The obligation is a universal one to know this book of books as we know no other book.